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ABSTRACT

This literature review focuses on approaches to measuring and improving the self-concept of young children with special needs. Two particular models dominate the debate on the self-concept construct: the perceptual model (in which self-concept is equated with a self-description formed during the preschool years) and an operational model (in which self-concept is an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behavior). This second model allows for multiple domains and recognition of cultural differences. Although self-concept is an important educational phenomenon, it has been a misused and misunderstood construct, with measures sometimes producing consistent results while failing to measure what they purport to measure. Special educators need to know that most standardized instruments of self-concept reflect the social ideal of the dominant society and that self-concept in young children is area-specific, situation-specific, and multidimensional in nature. Critical self-concept enhancement strategies include: (1) caring for the "special" child, (2) having reasonable expectations, (3) listening to the "special" child, (4) having rewarding environments, and (5) involving the "special" child. (Contains 26 references.) (DB)

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Self-Concept of Young "Special" Children: What Special Educators Should Know

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Abstract

Young children are consistently faced with problems which are beyond their design. These problems range from abuse and neglect to frightening uncertainty about the future. One solution to these problems which has been presented by researchers, and frequently used by special educators is the enhancement of young children's self-concepts. Even though, self-concept is a prescriptive dose for academic success and survival in life, its definition, evaluation and interpretation have been somewhat difficult. To ameliorate this quagmire, some contemporary researchers have suggested that special educators view self-concept as a self-descriptive behavior which is observable, measurable, and situation-specific. A logical extension is that self-concept can be operationally enhanced. In this paper, the authors discuss the self-concept of young "special" children. In addition, they delineate what special educators should know about operational self-concept enhancement strategies.

Self-Concept of Young "Special" Children:
What Special Educators Should Know

Young children (atypical or "normal") are faced with a myriad of problems. Some of these problems include (a) prevalence of single-parent families or families without "father" figures, (b) alarming rate of child abuse and neglect, (c) unending economic and social pressures on parents, (d) rampancy of drug abuse and dealing, (e) poor nutrition as a result of poverty, (f) preponderance of teenage pregnancy or "Babies" having babies, (g) disturbing rates of misery and suicide, (h) alarming rate of divorce or family breakdown, (i) unnecessary selfishness or "me-first" syndrome, (j) self-concept misinterpretations, and (k) negative perception of less fortunate, disadvantaged, and helpless individuals as socio-economic liabilities (Obiakor, 1990, 1992a). According to Shoaf (1990), "many children today struggle to cope with a world more uncertain and more frightening than ever before" (p. 13).

The dilemma confronting young "special" children has continued to challenge teachers to search for self-concept enhancement strategies. The traditional assumption is that self-concept and survival in life are positively correlated. In other words, the child who feels good about himself/herself usually succeeds in school programs. This classical notion of the highly interrelated self has been espoused by many educators and researchers (Bruck & Bodwin, 1962; Canfield & Siccone, 1993; Kinch, 1963; Purkey, 1970; Rogers, 1951; Siccone & Canfield, 1993; Snygg & Combs, 1949). Even though this notion has

dominated the literature, the definition, evaluation and interpretation of self-concept still attract varying conceptualizations. The contemporary conceptualization recognizes self-concept as an important educational phenomenon which can be defined, evaluated and interpreted as a multidimensional construct (Helper, 1955; Marsh, Parker & Barnes, 1985; Marsh & Smith, 1986; Muller, 1978; Muller, Chambliss & Muller, 1982, 1983; Obiakor, Stile & Muller, 1988). Either way, self-concept has continued to be a formidable ingredient in educational programs, yet as a construct it has varying interpretations. This paper discusses the self-concept of young "special" children and vividly delineates what special educators should know about operational self-concept enhancement strategies.

Self-Concepts of Young Children

Home-based, center-based, and home-center-based programs have emphasized self-concept as one of its central educational ingredients. One primary focus of early childhood programs has been self-concept; however, self-concept has continued to mean different things to different people. Its variability in the definition, assessment, and interpretation has, to a large extent, led to the proliferation of measurement tools, constructs and models. Two particular models (perceptual and operational models) have dominated the debate on the self-concept construct. Following are detailed discussions on the two models.

Perceptual Model of Self-Concept

The traditional model of self-concept has been based on the interrelated self. This view which has come to be known as the "perceptual" definition of self-concept simply describes how one sees or perceives himself/herself. This conceptualization also assumes that one's self-perceptions are fully developed before he/she enters the classroom for the first time. According to Canfield and Wells (1976):

> By the time a child reaches school age his self-concept is well formed and his reactions to learning, to school failure and success and to physical, social and emotional climate of the classroom will be determined by the beliefs and attitudes he has about himself. (p. 3)

The above supposition indicates that a change in self-concept is likely to affect a wide range of behaviors. When one aspect of the child's self-concept is affected, there is a "ripple" effect on his/her entire self-concept. If the perceptual model of self-concept is to be applied in the classroom for young children, it will require the involvement of the special educator or service provider with the school and home aspects of the student's life. Apparently, such a practice will place the teacher in a rather precarious position of encouraging classroom discussion on aspects of the child's life which are outside the primary domain of the school's delegated responsibility (Muller, et al, 1982, 1983). Moreover, this practice will encourage student labeling or categorization which hampers classroom learning and/or functional learning outcomes. It becomes educationally unproductive to use the perceptual conceptualization of self-concept in regular, special, or

mainstreamed classrooms for young children, especially in designing Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs).

It is important to note that traditional instruments used to measure self-concept have produced consistent results, but have failed to measure what they purport to measure. In fact, some of the instruments have failed to define self-concept, the construct that they are supposed to measure. The pertinent question is, then, how can an instrument measure the construct that it did not define? Apparently, these traditional instruments lack operational clarity. The questions in the instrument are usually area-specific and the interpretation of results is usually global. Another question seems to come to mind here. How can strengths and weaknesses of young "special" children be identified and enhanced when the interpretation of results is global?

Operational Model of Self-Concept

The operational model of self-concept is the contemporary approach of viewing the self. This alternate view conceptualizes self-concept as an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behavior (Muller, 1978). Many researchers and educators (Helper, 1955; Marsh, Parker, and Barnes, 1985; Marsh and Smith, 1986; Obiakor, 1992b; Obiakor and Alawiye, 1990; and Shavelson, Bolus and Keasling, 1980) have attempted to approach self-concept from a similar theoretical perspective. From this framework, a child's self-descriptions can be accurate or inaccurate, consistent or contradictory, extensive or limited, covert or

overt, and sometimes change as contexts change. Muller, et al (1982) had argued that "self-descriptive behaviors quantified in terms of positiveness should, when factor analyzed yield a number of discrete, internally consistent factors" (p. 7). They contended that self-concept has three subsets (self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-ideal), which can be measured in the areas of physical maturity, peer relations, academic success, and school adaptiveness. It appears (and reasonably so) that dividing the self-concept of the "special" child into such discrete construct areas has several educational implications (Obiakor, 1992b; Obiakor & Stile 1989, 1990; Obiakor, Stile & Muller, 1988; Princes & Obiakor, 1990). According to Muller, et al (1982):

> ...Instructional strategies designed to alter self-concept can be focused on those aspects of self-concept directly relevant to the school. This eliminates the need to intrude into the personal or family aspects of the student's life. A related implication is that programs designed to impact on self-concept in one area (e.g. peer relations) are not likely to impact on self-concept in other areas (e.g. of academics). Our work has convinced us that for the majority of students, effective classroom management of self-concept can be accomplished by limiting our efforts to the school life of the child. (p. 9)

Marshall (1989) had addressed the issue of self-concept by reiterating its multidimensional relationship to young children. She noted that "as children develop, self-concept becomes increasingly differentiated into multiple domains" (p. 45). She exposed the impact of cultural differences on the assessment and instruction of students on self-concept domains. She remarked:

> The importance of each of these domains differs for individuals and families, and among cultures. A low self-

> evaluation in one domain, such as athletic ability, may have little effect on the individual if it is not considered important in a particular family or culture. (p. 45)

Apparently, Marshall's view has been expanded in my other works published elsewhere. The inherent prejudices and biases in popular assessment tools have added more meaning to her work.

What Special Educators Should Know

The above discussions have two major educational implications for special educators and service providers. The primary implication is that self-concept is an important educational phenomenon which special educators should take seriously. The second, and most important implication, is that self-concept has been a misused and misunderstood construct which has been defined, assessed and interpreted in unproductive ways.

It is easy to find in the literature that raising the positiveness of self-concept of the learner will enhance his or her ability to gain from educational programs. While this notion is extremely popular, there is virtually little or no research evidence to support its validity (Muller, et al, 1982, 1983). Santrock and Yussen (1989) had explained that "the self is the core of a child's development; it includes a real self and an ideal self" (p. 391). They noted that the client-centered approach which Rogers (1980) had made popular "is almost too optimistic, possibly overestimating the freedom and rationality of individuals ((p.387). They added that "a major weakness of Rogers approach is that it is extremely difficult to test

scientifically" (p. 387). What, then, should special educators know and do in the midst of this confusion?

Special educators need to be aware that most standardized instruments which utilize self-description measure the observed self-descriptions that reflect the social ideal of the dominant society. These self-descriptions are scored as positive and those which are at odds are scored as negative. Contrarily, self-concept scores which reflect simple positiveness appear to have interpretative difficulties and do not provide adequate information for proper utilization of self-concept test results (Muller, et al, 1982, 1983). The utility of an instrument should be the primary concern of special educators and service providers. In addition, the emphasis should focus on the identification of school-related and non-school related behaviors which could facilitate functional and critical goal-directed decisions of young children. There are apparent disadvantages in globalizing behaviors that special children exhibit and in wrongfully interpreting their capabilities. These misinterpretations might be internalized by young children very early in life; thus, the self-fulfilling prophecy sets in.

Special educators need to understand the area-specific, situation-specific, and multidimensional nature of self-concept of young children. For example, a child might be "low" in his/her self-knowledge, but "high" in his/her self-esteem or self-ideal, and vice versa. Self-concept is not a static phenomenon that is genetically handed-down. It can be changed

and enhanced through environmental influences (Obiakor, 1992b). Apparently, it is dangerous to place a child in special education based on his/her self-concept results from instruments that not only lack validity and reliability but also fail to define the construct that they are supposed to measure.

Self-Concept Enhancement Strategies

Self-concept cannot be based on perception. As indicated earlier, it is a self-descriptive behavior which can be observed, described, measured, developed, and enhanced. Following are five important methods for enhancing self-concept of young "special" students.

Caring for the "Special" Child

Caring teachers know their children. Caring helps young "special" children to accurately assess their capabilities. Children, then, develop accurate self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-ideal. Special educators should challenge their young children while caring for them. Caring should entail understanding of strengths, and using these strengths to work on weaknesses. Children who are not appropriately challenged are not well-catered for. Caring for young "special" children is not as simplistic as it is traditionally addressed--it involves a combination of factors.

Having Reasonable Expectations

Expectations of teachers and parents of special students usually influence self-concept. They lead to competency, and sometimes to frustration. It is important that special educators

respect their children's learning styles. Young "special" children are different inter-individually and intra-individually. Appropriate expectations (and not lower or overtly higher expectations) stimulate young minds. When children are properly stimulated they learn very early the importance of self-determination, self-respect, and self-responsibility.

Listening to the "Special" Child

Good listening skills are important ingredients in self-recognition. It is easy to discover the current level of achievement of special children when they are listened to. Good listening skills prevent self-hatred and enhance self-esteem. Cultural and family pride cannot take place without good teaching and good listening. Good teaching does not mean indiscriminately punishing of the child under the umbrella of discipline--such a discipline can lead to alienation, deception, and frustration. Good teaching brings teachers, parents and children to cooperate with each other. Young supported "special" children are inspired to be self-confident in whatever they set to do. "Blind" support is as dangerous as "no" support at all. Realistic love can be shown without spoiling the child. Spoiling young children or not listening to them gives mixed signals, and destroys self-confidence.

Having Rewarding Environments

The environment that a young "special" child grows up in is an intricate variable to his/her social and emotional growth. The classroom environment provides another element that can

influence the child's self-concept. Special educators should help young children to (a) evaluate their environment realistically, (b) learn to set realistic goals, (c) learn to praise themselves, and (d) learn to praise others.

Involving the "Special" Child

In all situations, young children should be involved in making the rules about their behavior. They have minds -- they are no tabula rasas. Special educators always like to take charge without involving young children that they are supposed to help. Responsibility should not only come from special teachers and parents, it should also come from young children themselves. Self-concept cannot be enhanced without the personal involvement of young children.

Perspectives

It is apparent that young children confront divergent problems which range from abuse and neglect to frightening uncertainty about the future. These problems continually challenge educators and parents of special children to search for ways to enhance self-love, self-understanding and self-concept of their children. Even with this effort, self-concept definition, assessment and interpretation has continued to remain difficult. The traditional definition of self-concept has failed to recognize the multidimensionality of the construct and leads to problems in identifying specific strengths and weaknesses of young "special" children. Coupled with these problems, traditional instruments used in measuring self-concept have

sometimes produced consistent results while failing to measure what they purport to measure. To minimize this quagmire, researchers and special educators have focused on alternative area-specific approaches. By so doing, specific strengths and weaknesses of young children's self-concepts are identified to facilitate the development of IEPs. Since self-concepts of young "special" students are area-specific, situation-specific and can change as contexts change, it behooves special educators to identify operational methods to enhance self-concepts. These methods should include (a) caring and challenging young students, (b) having reasonable expectations, and (c) involving young "special" students in developing internal locus of control for their survival in today's changing world.

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